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BEAT THE DEVIL.

The Captive Press

Given the dexterity with which the mass media have managed to conceal from their audiences the Administration's sabotage of the Contadora process and of the bilateral talks between the United States and Nicaragua in Mexico, I wondered what sort of coverage would be given President Daniel Ortega's most recent peace moves, which he unveiled to a delegation of U.S. Catholic bishops on February 27. Ortega announced three unilateral initiatives: an indefinite moratorium on the acquisition of new arms systems and interception airplanes by Nicaragua, the withdrawal of one hundred Cuban military advisers as an initial step toward the removal of all foreign military personnel from the region, and an open invitation to a bipartisan delegation from Congress to visit Nicaraguan military facilities to confirm that Nicaragua's armed forces are defensive in nature. This invitation is probably the first carte blanche offer of on-site verification in the history of arms control.

By far the worst of the three major networks was CBS. Dan Rather gave no details of the Nicaraguan proposals, referring only vaguely to "peace overtures." This followed a general pattern in which most of the press shunted aside the actual proposals in favor of the White House response to them. Therefore the operative words in the leads were the reactive ones of the Reagan Administration: "Sophisticated propaganda." In CBS's case the reporting on Ortega's offer took the form of a press release from the White House, with Vice President Bush telling Lesley Stahl that Nicaragua was Cuba and Libya rolled into one. Stahl was followed by David Martin in Managua, who said, "The Sandinista pledge to stop their arms buildup is not so much a concession to the Reagan Administration as an acknowledgment that they have reached the limit of what they can absorb." Two days earlier Martin had reported that the Nicaraguan forces had only a defensive capability.

NBC was almost as bad. Tom Brokaw confined his description of Ortega's announcement to two words, "new offers," before yielding the screen to Marvin Kalb. Predictably, Kalb began, "In the view of U.S. officials, the Nicaraguan President, Daniel Ortega, has opened a major propaganda campaign." Kalb cited the first two Nicaraguan initiatives but omitted the offer of on-site inspection. Neither Kalb nor Stahl felt it necessary to challenge the Administration's claim that the offer to remove one hundred Cuban military advisers involved only "about 1 percent of the Cuban presence"—a preposterous statement even by the White House's usual estimate that between 2,000 and 3,000 Cubans are in Nicaragua. The U.S. press has almost invariably parroted that line, despite the assertion of both Cuba and Nicaragua, backed by some independent observers, that the true number is about 300. During the Grenada invasion, over the heated objections of his own top intelligence analyst, John Horton, who eventually resigned in protest, C.I.A. chief William Casey insisted there were more than 1,200 Cubans on the island, many of them hiding in the hills. Castro's assertion that there were 786 Cubans in Grenada turned out to be correct.

On *Meet the Press* on March 3, Kalb pushed his brand of pro-Reagan editorializing further, with this description of the Administration's hard line: "It is, depending on your point of view, confrontational bordering on dangerous or courageous—a proper response to a communist challenge."

ABC's coverage was much superior (within the narrow limits of network reporting and commentary). Peter Jennings opened with the words "It may be difficult for the government of Nicaragua to understand what the Reagan Administration really means," and Sam Donaldson mentioned all three parts of the Nicaraguan proposal before concluding, "Ortega's announcement may be nothing more than propaganda, but it may nevertheless prove to be a potent weapon." The following day ABC reported what most of the media had carefully ignored: that on his trip to Montevideo, Uruguay, Ortega was "greeted by wildly enthusiastic crowds, cheering his name as if he was about to be named president of Uruguay."

If you can't ignore it, distort it. That same evening, February 28, on the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, Jim Lehrer said that Ortega had offered "a moratorium on new weapons systems and sending one hundred Cuban military advisers home in exchange for a U.S. halt to its support of the *contra* guerrillas who are fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua." Of course, the point of Ortega's initiatives to get Contadora back on track was that they were unilateral and unconditional.

And yet administration officials look for the ayatollah.

It is reasonable to be wary of developing dangers, certainly. Riding carefully points out that while "nothing has proven more wrong than predicting the demise of Mexico's political system," there "is little room for complacency. Beneath the surface calm, the repercussions of change, growth, urbanization are subjecting society to unprecedented strain." But the peculiar alarmism evident in Washington seems to go beyond that. Sometimes it appears less protective than vindictive. Mexico has crossed the United States recently, and the attitude of many members of the administration is, plainly, that it has no right.

WASHINGTON is intent on bringing the Caribbean basin firmly back under its control, now going so far as to push openly for the overthrow of Nicaragua's government; and Mexico, with legalisms and peace initiatives, keeps getting in the way. The administration sees the contagion of communist revolution sweeping up from the south toward the biggest domino of all—Mexico itself—but the Mexicans are somehow blind to it. They may not embrace the Sandinistas as they once did, but they seem congenitally ill-disposed toward efforts to oust them.

In this context Mexico's diplomatic initiatives become, as a leaked White House document put it, something to be "trumped." And looking for the ayatollah, even in a figurative sense, is a way of insinuating that Mexico is incapable of keeping its own house in order, much less making suggestions about anyone else's.

MEANWHILE Washington has come to define "democracy" as the way our friends govern themselves. And from such a standpoint, if Mexico looks less than friendly on certain issues, it is deemed less than democratic. Even as the administration helps Mexico with its disastrous finances, behind-the-scenes administration officials encourage criticism of Mexico's political abuses and fuel the enthusiasm for its right-wing, business-oriented opposition parties. The opposition, in turn, criticizes the PRI for not supporting U.S. policy in Central America.

On this difficult juncture between foreign and domestic policy, Riding's analysis is clear and dispassionate. He outlines the complicated relations between successive Mexican presidents and Fidel Castro, the history of Mexican aid to Nicaragua's Sandinistas, and Mexican cooperation with El Salvador's insurgents. He presents the divisions within President Miguel de la Madrid's own cabinet over these issues. And then he presents the problems as de la Madrid would have to see them. "A more conservative foreign policy alone would not appease domestic conservatives, but it would alienate liberals and leftists who give relatively more importance to foreign affairs." De la Madrid might distance himself from Cuba and Nicaragua and El Salvador's revolutionaries

> without gaining credibility and influence in Washington. Mexico clearly cannot afford to withdraw from Central America, to allow the fate of a strategic region to be defined entirely by others. It also cannot endorse a U.S. strategy that appears to feed instability. Its only remaining option, therefore, was to remain politically aligned with revolutionary forces in the region. As in the past, the new government looked for alternatives, but found that Washington—and history—permitted none.

Riding concludes with a warning that, thus far, has been little heeded by the administration. He has tried throughout the book to draw a contrast between the upwardly mobile, highly Americanized middle classes, the part of the Mexican population to which Washington pays the most attention, and "the ordinary Mexicans," most of them peasants or the children of peasants, whose roots have more spiritual depth—in the mysticism of the Catholic church and the Aztec Temple—and whose patience, unless sorely tested, has much greater endurance than most Western cultures have seen. "By trying to make the country more superficially democratic, more Western, more 'presentable' abroad," Riding cautions, "the system's roots in the population have weakened. It has become less truly democratic because it is less representative of real Mexicans. The more the system responds to the Americanized minority, the more blatant will be the contradictions within the country." The greater the chance, one might say, that there will be an ayatollah to look for.

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Christopher Dickey's book on the United States and Nicaragua will be published in the fall by Simon and Schuster.